

# KULA KAI, KANOHINA CAVES AND THE CCH

## **Ric Elhard**

*Cave Conservancy of Hawaii*  
P.O. Box 6313  
Oceanview, HI, 96737, USA, [ricelhard@gmail.com](mailto:ricelhard@gmail.com)

## **Tomislav Gracanin**

*Cave Conservancy of Hawaii*  
92-8955 King Kamehameha (not a mailing address)  
Oceanview, HI, 96737, USA, [tmv@att.net](mailto:tmv@att.net)

## **History of Kanohina and CCH**

It is impossible to know how and when the caves on the south west rift of Mauna Loa were discovered as it was certainly in pre written Hawaiian history by people long gone from life as we now know it. Evidence leads us to believe it may have been at least 200 to 300 years before present and probably longer ago. It was inevitable that contemporary men would find, explore and document the vast cave system in the Kula Makai area of the south flank of one of the world's greatest volcanoes.

The area known as Kula Kai is a section of land that was parceled off from a larger ranch holding known as Kahuku Ranch established 1866. In the late 1950's several sections were sold and parceled for subdivision in this district of Ka'u. The largest parcel is the Hawaiian Ocean View Estates. This 11,000 acre subdivision has significant cave trunks and passages associated with the Kanohina Cave system but it is in Kula Kai that the cave reveals itself as a world class geologic wonder of multilevel and braided lava ducts. Kula Kai is a subdivision of approximately 150 acres subdivided into 3 acre parcels. Kula Kai refers to a plain or open country facing towards the ocean. This aptly describes the area overlying the cave system we now refer to as Kanohina Caves.

Contemporary discovery of the caves in the kula area was certainly made by the bulldozer operators that pushed the roads for the subdivisions. A few stories remain regarding finding artifacts during this time but like the ancient history of these caves the stories are mostly lost and only discerned by exploring the caves and interpreting archeological remains. Little regard was made for the caves or archeology during the early days of land development. Roads were established according to planned grids and if the cave was in the way it was sacrificed by collapse or in fill. Artifacts were probably sold or added to private collections.

It was not by design only luck that persons interested in caves purchased land in the Kula Kai Estates. In 1990 there was only one developed lot in Kula Kai. Ric Elhard and Rose Herrera purchased a lot with one of the large entrances to the cave. The intention was to explore the possibility of establishing a commercial cave tour in Hawaii, something not done at the time. After a year of exploring the cave it was apparent that there were issues to be resolved before establishing any use of the cave. Initial exploration revealed that it was quite extensive and contained archeological areas. There was the concern of land use and the Hawaiian sensitivity to the heritage of the aina. Some of these concerns were addressed in the establishment of an Act for Cave Protection in 2002 which described ownership of cave passages as well as artifacts found in caves. This sorted out a legal status regarding caves in Hawaii but the question of the geology and extent of the caves was not addressed until 1998. It was in this year the official cartography effort was mounted in the Kula Kai caves. A map of the Kula Kai section existed but survey efforts revealed several miles of extensive cave was underlying this kula makai area of the volcano.

It became apparent that establishing a commercial offering had greater implications than hanging up a sign and open for business. The extent of the cave and its resources demanded a greater look towards managing any project associated with the cave. Ric and Rose projected a use that combined tourism, education and conservation utilizing the cave as the base for such a project. Little did they know that a dedicated group of cartographers, scientists, resource managers, as well as some of the Hawaiian community would become involved in discovering the lost history of the Kanohina Caves.

The greater cave was called Kanohina after the historic name of the lower area of the mountain called Kipuka Kanohina. Kanohina may be derived from Kano, a birding or broken stick and hina, a windy place.

This correctly defines the area as there is evidence of Hawaiians hunted birds on the surface areas and there is a perpetual wind blowing across the lava field. Other names associated with the cave are more contemporary. Initial survey efforts lent names like Kula Kai, Poha, Eli's and Maelstrom. Later additions to surveyed areas were dubbed Cordwinder, Xanadu, Ohana Kai Maze and other sections waiting exploration and naming. Survey efforts have connected many sections into 26 miles of passage, with a total accumulation of 40 miles of cave passage.

It became apparent in the early days of the survey that protection of this vast cave would be important for now and future generations. Some of the early proponents of establishing a cave conservancy in Hawaii were Bill Halliday and Fred Stone, both involved in cave science and geologic interpretation of cave resources in the early years of Hawaii cave science. Fortunately the exciting contemporary discovery and documentation of the Kanohina Cave started the serious discussion of conservancy for Hawaii. Discussion between Ric Elhard and Don Coons resulted in soliciting the IRS for a Non-profit status for the Cave Conservancy of Hawaii. A board of directors and officers receiving a 501C3 status in August of 2003 established a new dawn in the Hawaii caving community. Later work lead to CCH being recognized by the State of Hawaii as a not-for-profit corporation, with the additional benefit of making it a tax exempt corporation within Hawaii.

A nice ending to a story started in 1990 with an unclear story line has resulted in a tale of good news for Hawaii caving community. With the efforts of land owners, cavers, scientists, and the general public accomplishments include cave protection laws, successful business employing local residents, new and exciting science, education and conservation of resources we all explore and enjoy.... the caves of Hawaii.

## **Cave Conservancy of Hawaii Today**

CCH today has evolved into a significant organization within the Hawaii community as well as the caving community. It has adhered to its primary mission to protect and preserve caves from negative impacts of development, primarily in the Kula Kai and Oceanview subdivisions. To follow this mission CCH has

- 1) Purchased land to preserve and protect portions of a major cave system;
- 2) Assessed cave resources in the region through surveys and photography;
- 3) Developed management plans for the caves it owns;
- 4) Engaged in education regarding the significance and importance of protecting cave resources;

- 5) Worked hard to develop good relations with landowner of caves and to educate them on best practices to protect cave resources;
- 6) Encouraged and supported cave related research projects in geology, archeology, biology and paleontology;
- 7) Done environmental clean-up of dumps related to caves; and
- 8) Become a focal point of cave related activity on Hawai'i.
- 9) A major present and future activity is fund raising. The funds are needed not only for new property acquisition, but also to cover the increasing amount of taxes on previously acquired property.
- 10) CCH is now embarking on a new mission with more responsibility that involves engaging with government organizations to do cave resource assessment on public lands.

## **References**

- Ewell Marge and Dennis. History of Kahuku Ranch.
- Pukui Mary Kawena, Elbert Samuel H. Hawaiian Dictionary.
- NSS News Feb. 2004.